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# Going Where the Users Are: Three Variations on a Theme

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# LOUISIANA LIBRARIES

LOUISIANA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION



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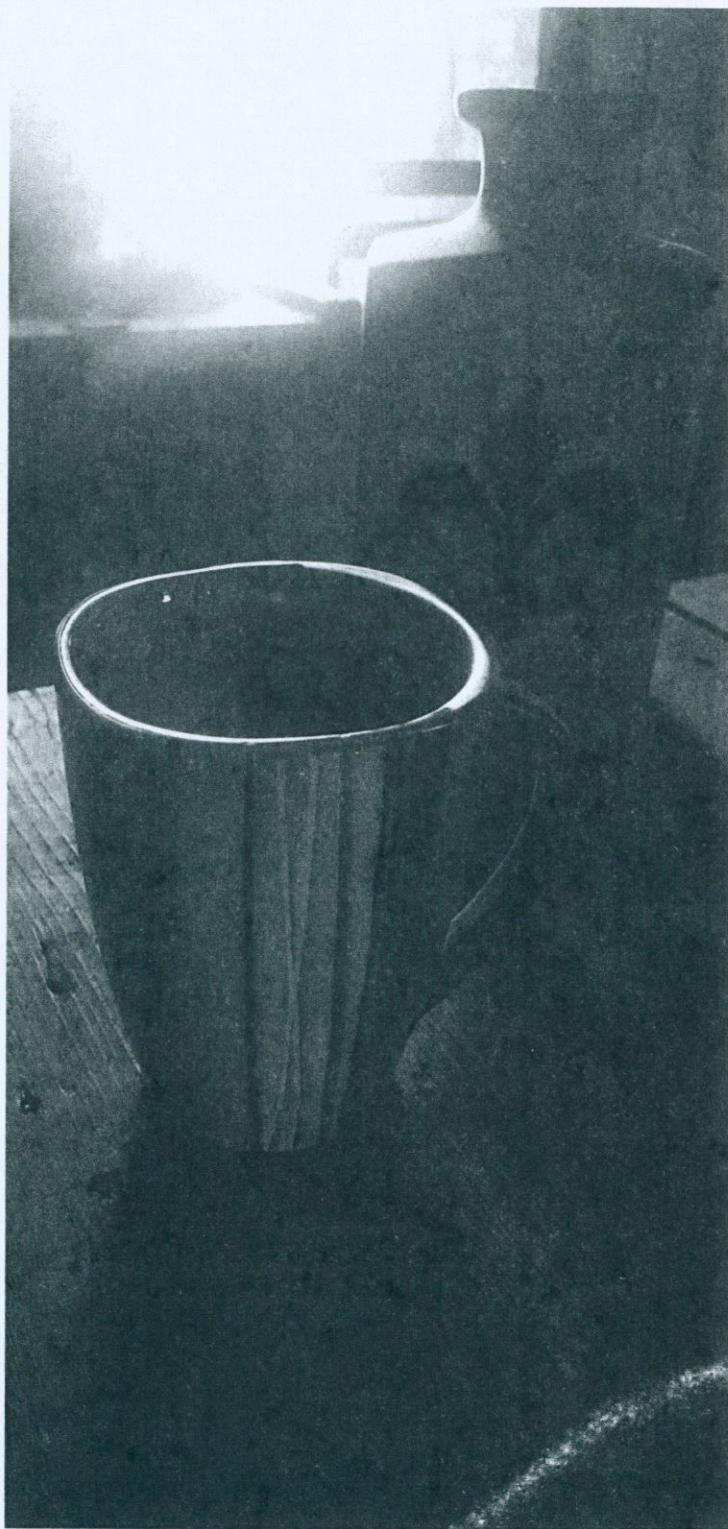


# LOUISIANA LIBRARIES

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**on the cover**

*Louisiana Mug*  
Patti Malloy



# Going Where the Users Are:

## *Three Variations on a Theme*

By Mitch Fontenot, Emily Frank,  
and Andrea Hebert

As statistics decline and user interactions evolve, libraries are rethinking their reference desk staffing models. LSU Libraries has had several opportunities to reinvent the reference or, now, research desk. Three opportunities that focused on bringing the librarian to the user presented themselves over the last few years with varying degrees of success. One librarian experimented with embedding a credit-bearing LIS course into the LSU Global Connections Residential Life Program; others set up a satellite reference desk at the Student Union; and two librarians held office hours in the graduate student lounge at the School of Social Work. This paper will discuss what worked well, what did not, and what fell somewhere in between.

### **Global Connections Residential Life Program**

About four years ago, LSU Libraries' instruction coordinator, Mike Russo, sent out a call to the instruction librarians to volunteer for a special program at Louisiana State University. The program, Global Connections Residential Life Program (now called the Humanities and Social Sciences Residential College), is dedicated to reaching students majoring in the humanities and social sciences who are interested in global and state issues. Mitch Fontenot, Outreach Librarian and avid world traveler (he was the assistant librarian for Semester at Sea in spring 2001), volunteered. With a background in the humanities (BA in English literature) and social sciences (then subject librarian for psychology, sociology, and social work), he was an ideal fit for the program.

Fontenot was charged with teaching two LIS (Library and Information Science) 1001 classes to students entering the residential college. The course focused on the developing fundamental academic research skills, and Fontenot would be emphasizing global and state issues throughout the instruction. Additionally, he held office hours at South Hall where the residents were living, made a relevant presentation to the students, and attended the talks of other lecturers in the program. Meredith Veldman, professor of history at LSU and rector for the program at the time, provided him with information about the program

and outlined the expectations for instructors.

Fontenot customized his LIS 1001 course to reflect global and state issues and tied instruction with the aims of the program. Students engaged with the information literacy skills and library tools--databases and search strategies--that would aid them in their research papers. He found that the students exhibited a high-level of engagement from the beginning of the course. When asked for examples of possible research issues for catalog and database searches, they readily volunteered ideas tied to their research projects. He coordinated field trips to Hill Memorial Library, the university's special collections library, and to the Cartographic Information Center, the map library, to highlight their relevance to Louisiana and global issues.

He held office hours Monday through Friday for one hour per day, alternating mornings and afternoons at the residential college, South Hall. He presented a program on the features of the LSU Libraries' home page at South Hall to approximately forty members of the program. He also participated in the program's educational and social activities. Usually once a week, there was a presentation, conversation, movie, or other event focused on a world issue, along with refreshments. The events ranged from watching and discussing foreign and independent films to attending presentations and tasting international cuisines. The events were well attended and intellectually stimulating. The overall program was intentionally designed and funded so that these social events were fun and participatory, contributing to the success of the program.

### **The LSU Student Union**

During fall 2014, the User Services Task Force was formed with five librarians who received a charge that included investigating other models of service away from the Research Desk to determine whether they were feasible and, if so, to develop a plan to initiate them in trial versions. In response, the librarians identified potential sites, including the Student Union, career center, and student-athlete building, before deciding to pursue a trial run of embedding in the Student Union for the fall



semester. Before beginning, the task force completed a literature review for practical ideas on roaming and embedded librarianship. Then, after meeting with the Union administrators and proposing the idea, five librarians rotated working at a desk location on the first floor in a heavily trafficked area. The librarians covered Mondays from 10 A.M.–12 P.M. and Thursdays from 12 P.M.–2 P.M. with a rotation of one librarian per hour. This schedule was intended to align with peak hours based on the class changes on those respective days.

The librarians came equipped with an iPad, campus maps, and a notepad for keeping reference questions and tracking statistics (sample of pages below):

- Where is the nearest bike pump?  
 - Where is the student government?  
 - Can I print at all in the Union?  
 - Are there microwaves in the Union?  
 - When is the pool open to re-open?  
 - Where can I get a laptop from?  
 2,2 - Where is the student gov. office?  
 - Is there a subway in the Union?  
 - Why is the pool hall closed?  
 Re 9-15-14 - Where is Student government?  
 - " " " "  
 - When will our hall re-open?

Librarian	Hours	Questions
Kelly	11/1	8/25/14
Mike	1/1	8/26/14
Emily	11/1	8/27/14
Kelly/Mike	10-11 = 1 11-12 = 1	9/4/14
Nash	11/1	9/8/14
Michael	11/1	9/11/14
Mike	11/1	9/15/14
Marty	11/1	9/18/14
Emily	11/1	9/18/14
Kelly	11/1	9/22/14
Michael	11/1	9/22/14

during a state library conference that the task force members attended. Throughout the trial, questions were infrequent—a total of 113 questions were received between 8/25/2014 and 12/11/2014. The vast majority of questions were directional, with the most common questions being the location of bookstore, Student Government office, bike pump, printers, microwaves, Kaplan Center, barbershop, mailing services, career center, lost and found, bathrooms, and free scantron distribution. The near absence of questions that required an interaction beyond a couple of seconds in length meant that very few surveys were deployed or received, resulting in insufficient data. The embedding project faced additional challenges, including poor visibility of the reference area because of low seating and dim lighting. Students in the Student Union were largely preoccupied with conversations and lunch, not academic work that could result in research questions. The task force shared a report of the trial with library administration and decided to discontinue the program after fall 2014. They also concluded that further experimentation could be beneficial, revisiting this model at other locations on campus.

## LSU School of Social Work

In the spring of 2015, Fontenot began working embedded hours at the School of Social Work. He met with and suggested the idea to the new director of the school; the director was receptive to the idea and had worked closely with the social work librarian at his previous institution. Based on class schedules, the director and Fontenot determined that the hours of 11:30-12:30 Monday through Friday in the student lounge had the greatest chance of success. A library graduate assistant created signage for the lounge featuring the embedded hours and additional contact information. The librarian also left business cards near the signage in the lounge. He brought an iPad and was available in the student lounge for questions and research advice.

Although Fontenot started the program halfway through the semester, he did have moderate success. The social work students were open to having their librarian onsite, and some made use of his hours there. Questions ran the gamut of research sessions on statistics lasting a half hour to simple questions about appropriate databases. Although he took a

They also had a short survey for students:

Student Union Research Desk

1. How helpful was the assistance you received?

☐ Very helpful    ☐ Helpful    ☐ Somewhat helpful    ☐ Not at all helpful

2. How frequently do you use LSU Libraries' resources and services (books, databases, librarians, study spaces)?

☐ A couple times a week    ☐ A couple times a month    ☐ A couple times a semester    ☐ Never

3. Select your designation:

☐ Freshman    ☐ Sophomore    ☐ Junior  
☐ Senior    ☐ Grad student    ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. If you have comments or ideas for how we can improve, please let us know!

A sign was created that read: Research Help – Ask Us. The desk was located near McDonald's, seating for student and diners, and big screen televisions. The desk closed during Thanksgiving break and



break from his embedded hours during the summer semester because of low summer enrollment, he planned to have hours at the school beginning in fall 2015; however, his liaison responsibilities for the School of Social Work were transferred to the new Human Sciences & Education librarian, Andrea Hebert.

Hebert adopted his practice of spending time in the student lounge in fall 2015. At the director of the School's suggestion, she scheduled her embedded hour to coincide with a time when most first-year graduate students were free. The program was very successful. She was available at the point of need for students on a regular basis for small issues (e.g., how to request items through interlibrary loan, how to access databases from home, how to do basic searches), and several students set up in-depth consultations with her outside of her onsite visits. This cohort of students was close knit and social, and she came to know many of them on an individual level. She maintained her outreach hour in spring 2016, but by this time, the students in the cohort felt more confident in their research skills. Although she still enjoyed her time with them, they had few library-related questions.

In fall 2016, she once again coordinated her embedded hour in the School with the first-year graduate students' free period, but the incoming cohort was less cohesive. Students infrequently ate lunch together in the lounge, and she received very few questions. Because of the decrease in questions, she discontinued the program in spring 2017. Although fall semesters had been busier than spring semesters in 2015 and 2016, she chose not to resume the program in fall 2017 because of increasing obligations in her other liaison areas.

Despite discontinuing the program, the insight she gained into the library and research-related questions of first-year social work graduate students helped her fine tune her beginning-of-the-year instruction sessions for the program's incoming students.

## Conclusions

For LSU Libraries, experimenting with offsite research help and instruction justified the time and effort put into the projects. Librarians were able to explore various models with little overhead expense and no negative consequences from unsuccessful efforts—all while increasing positive

contact with students.

Program integration and location were key factors in the outcomes of these offsite initiatives. Embedding in the Global Connections Residential Life Program worked well, setting up a satellite reference desk in the Union did not, and although providing support within the School of Social Work was discontinued, the experience was still valuable.

Fontenot's experiment with Global Connections was the most successful of the three programs because of its close ties to the Global Connections curriculum. He structured his LIS 1001 course around the Global Connections program, which both required and rewarded student participation. The graduate students in the School of Social Work appreciated the presence of a librarian versed in specialized resources, but as their research efficacy increased, their need for an onsite librarian decreased. Librarians at the Student Union asked few questions beyond simple directional questions. Although the satellite desk was located in heavily traveled area, it was in an area where most student were focused on their social lives instead of their academic lives.

The responsibilities of liaisons in the LSU Libraries' Research & Instruction Services department continue to evolve. Beginning in 2017, the librarians were no longer responsible for teaching LIS 1001 and, although librarians still work occasional desk shifts, a library staff member, graduate assistant, and student workers work the majority of shifts at the traditional research desk. This staffing model allows subject librarians more time to reach out to their faculty and students to provide specialized instruction and individualized research consultations. It also frees librarians spend more time in their subject-area departments and experiment with alternative services beyond the library's walls. The lessons learned from these three programs can be used to design the next round of off-site efforts.

## Suggested Readings

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